

Tough love – John 13:34-35

It sounds so easy. We Christians ought to be able to love, right? It's a defining mark of who we are. It's fundamental to the faith we proclaim and commanded by the One we follow. So why is it so hard to practice this radical and inclusive love by which Jesus says people will recognize us as his followers?

What is it about love that is so difficult? Maybe the answer is found by contrasting when and where love seems easy. Love's easy when I love people who think like me, look like me, live like me, and love me, too. Heck, that's a recipe for a veritable love fest. Love's easy when I can talk about it, read about it, and think about it. Love in abstract appears mighty appealing. Romantic love and movie love seem so special and charming. Everybody loves a good story, right? Yes, when we look at love through these lenses, it looks downright doable and delightful. Human nature is considerably messier, however, and even the most self-aware and selfless among us can find love to be tough in practice.

That said, we must never give up trying to live into a life of radical love. For those of us charged with preaching and teaching and leading in the beloved community, we must never stop talking about what Jesus says about love, what love looks like in practice and action, and how we get to places of deeper and more mature Christian love. This Sunday's gospel lesson reminds us of this necessity. Jesus commands us to love.

To provide a way to understand and practice radical love, consider using the letters of the word "love" to describe how to learn, cultivate, and practice love.

Listen—to love is also to listen. It is important to listen intently to the one or ones we are called to love, to hear what he or she has to say, and to be attentive to the other's feelings and thoughts. Listening involves silencing one's own internal voices by avoiding the rush to conjure up a response before the person has even finished speaking. Listening also requires willingness to sit with some space to think about and understand what is spoken. *Invite people to contemplate their active listening skills and to sit with silence.*

Open—to love is to be open to others and to new possibilities. The minute we close our minds and hearts to the possibility of change and growth we also smother our capacity to love. Because love is not static, because love seeks the good of others, radical love calls us to open our minds, our hearts, and our lives to the new, the strange, and even the uncomfortable. We trust the Spirit's guidance as we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open to others, and we pray for help to avoid judgment and prejudice in the process.

Visible—to love is to be visible. Love does not hide its light. Love goes out into the world and risks being seen with those who are easy to love and those who push us beyond our comfort zones. Jesus never shrank from being seen and interacting with those on the margins or who were unclean and unacceptable in the eyes of the established religious traditions and institutions of his day. Sure, much of love takes place quietly in unseen and unappreciated ways, but love does not hesitate to enter life's trenches, roll up her sleeves, and be Christ's hands, feet, and eyes in the world. *Invite people to find ways to make radical love visible in the week to come.*

Engage—to love is not to sit idly by and watch life parade ^{on by} ~~go past~~. To love is to engage life fully, to enter into relationship with others in a spirit of hope and joy and love. Engaging in life and relationship can be messy and dirty, to be sure, but there is no other way to experience life in community and to share the agape love of Jesus. We are called to open our faith communities to all, to open our homes, and to open our hearts. We risk pain, we risk breach of trust, but we also risk wonder and light and peace. If we believe Christ's words to "love one another as I have loved you" then we must engage one another as Christ engaged saint and sinner alike. We must practice hospitality, mercy, and lovingkindness. *Invite people to find one way to engage in active, radical love this week—either through a ministry or on their own at work or in the community.*

When we confess each week that we have failed to love, that we have sinned against God and neighbor, we receive forgiveness and turn anew to try again. Will we get it right this time? Probably not. Will we make progress and perhaps even make a difference in the name of the One who loves us with a love stronger than death? We very well might. The sure thing is that we will never know unless we try, and we will likely not try unless we remind each other that Jesus commands us to love. This is not an option. This is the life, the way, of those who follow Christ.